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Deposited in DRO:

13 October 2017

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Regan, Stephen (2017) 'The sonnet and its travels.', CounterText., 3 (2). pp. 162-175.

Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.3366/count.2017.0086>

Publisher's copyright statement:

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The Sonnet and its Travels

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The sonnet has a distinguished place in literary history as one of the most durable poetic forms, but it also has claims to being one of the most widely travelled. Its versatility and adaptability can be measured historically, through its extraordinary persistence since its invention in the thirteenth century, but also geographically, through the expansive terrain in which it has made itself at home. Most critical studies of the sonnet in English trace its development from its Italian predecessors, through its domestication in Elizabethan England, to its remarkable popularity among modern British, Irish, and American poets.¹ Of course, the sonnet flourished elsewhere in Europe, with Lope de Vega (1562-1635) in Spain; Luís de Camões (1524-80) in Portugal; Pierre de Ronsard (1524-85) in France; Andreas Gryphius (1616-64) in Germany; and Maria Gustava Gyllenstierna (1672-1737) in Sweden. A roll call of modern practitioners of the sonnet would include Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, Rainer Maria Rilke, Rudolf Alexander Schröder, Eugenio Montale, Jean Cassou, and Pablo Neruda, to name but a few.

Throughout its history, the sonnet in English has asserted its claims to global vision, often provocatively embracing a worldwide perspective disproportionate to its size. Shakespeare memorably opened the sonnet to the enthralling prospect ‘Of the wide world dreaming on things to come’ (Shakespeare 2002: 595), and that imaginative vista reappears over and over again in the history of the sonnet, most notably in the poems of John Keats, in the ‘wide expanse’ of his sonnet ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’ and in ‘the wide world’ confronting the solitary mind in his poignant self-elegy, ‘When I have fears that I may cease to be’ (Keats

1970: 38, 366). The appeal of the sonnet as a global form is given a playfully novel turn in a poem that has frequently been anthologized, though very likely for sentimental reasons: ‘Letty’s Globe’ by Charles Tennyson Turner. The sonnet depicts a child coming to know her home and what lies beyond it through ‘a coloured sphere / Of the wide earth’ (Fuller 2000: 165):

When Letty had scarce passed her third glad year,
 And her young artless words began to flow,
 One day we gave the child a coloured sphere
 Of the wide earth, that she might mark and know,
 By tint and outline, all its sea and land.
 She patted all the world; old Empires peeped
 Between her baby fingers; her soft hand
 Was welcome at all frontiers. How she leaped,
 And laughed and prattled in her world-wide bliss!
 But when we turned her sweet unlearned eye
 On our own isle, she raised a joyous cry,
 ‘O yes! I see it, Letty's home is there!’
 And, while she hid all England with a kiss,
 Bright over Europe fell her golden hair.

It is far too easy to dismiss the sonnet for what might look like collusion with Victorian imperialist ideology. As John Fuller notes, Letty’s ‘epiphanic but Aryan “golden hair” seems at once to bless and defy the frontier-conscious Europe of the early nineteenth century’ (Fuller 2000: xxx). There is nothing heavy-handed here; rather the ‘soft hand’ that ‘patted all the world’ and is ‘welcome at all frontiers’ traces the globe in innocent curiosity, just as the ‘unlearned eye’ is set against a knowledge of ‘old Empires’. The function of the sonnet is both to acknowledge and to efface, for a brief moment of ‘world-wide bliss’, the boundaries of England, Europe, and Empire. It does so by stealthily traversing the boundaries of the sonnet itself, first by running on over the first quatrain and ending syntactically with line 5, and then by allowing Letty’s excited leaping to carry the sonnet over the expected division between octave and sestet, delaying the turn until line 10. In a cunningly self-referential move, the turn coincides with the moment Letty turns to England, and

‘turned’ is given additional prominence through an internal rhyme with ‘unlearned’. Syntactically, then, the sonnet is arranged in units of 5+4+3+2 rather than 4+4+4+2. Its curious rhyme scheme (*abab cdcd effg eg*) sets up expectations of an English, rather than Petrarchan, sonnet, but the pattern is dissolved after the delayed turn and we are denied the full satisfaction of a rhyming couplet.

Often the sonnet uses its structural divisions, not just as an indication of articulated units of thought, but also as imaginary thresholds that might transport us into new realms of thought and feeling. In this respect, the geographical terrain of the sonnet is consonant with the exploration of the mind itself and with the opening up of infinite expanses of knowledge. It is not surprising that a strongly spatial emphasis is given to the sonnet in the nineteenth century, when a greater ease of travel coincides with new vistas of artistic, as well as scientific, exploration. Baudelaire is thought to have composed his sonnet ‘A Une Dame Créole’ (‘To a Creole Lady’) on his way home to Paris from Ile Bourbon during a voyage on the Indian Ocean in 1841. Purportedly addressed to Mme Autard de Bragard, the poem is one of the earliest of *Les Fleurs du Mal* (published twenty years later), and it brings to the conventional love sonnet a strongly exotic and orientalist tinge:

In scented countries by the sun caressed
I’ve known, beneath a tent of purple boughs,
And palmtrees shedding slumber as they drowse,
A creole lady with a charm unguessed.

In the sestet, however, the sonnet ironically shifts its gaze back from colonial France and its seemingly infinite poetic possibilities to ‘the land of glory / Along the Seine or Loire’. Here, the creole lady’s role would be to ‘ornament some mansion famed in story’, though she would breed ‘a thousand rhymes in poets’ hearts’ (Baudelaire 1954: 84). The image of poets tamed and subdued like slaves is in keeping with the hyperbolic figuring of love extending back to Petrarch and his contemporaries, but in

the colonial politics of the 1840s it has a very real and troubling presence. Slavery in the French colonies would not be abolished for another seven years. For all their libertarian tendencies, Baudelaire's sonnets are sometimes uncomfortably complicit with the existing political regime.

The publication of *Les Fleurs du Mal* in nineteenth-century Paris is nevertheless one of the crucial moments in the travels of the sonnet. Writing to Armand Fraisse, a reviewer of the book, in February 1860, Baudelaire explains why the sonnet should be regarded seriously, and in doing so he provides one of the most succinct and compelling accounts of its special formal qualities, acknowledging both 'la beauté pythagorique' (its mathematical precision and numerical logic) and 'la beauté du metal et du mineral bien travaillés' (the malleability and adaptability of the form, akin to well-worked metal and stone). His letter constitutes one of the most incisive descriptions of the architectonics of the sonnet:

What is then the imbecile (perhaps a well-known man) who deals so lightly with the Sonnet, and does not see its Pythagorean beauty? The idea comes out more intensely because its form is compressed; everything can fit into the Sonnet, buffoonery, gallantry, passion, dream, philosophic meditation. It has the beauty of well-worked metal or stone. Have you noticed that a sliver of sky, seen through a basement window, or between two chimneys, two rocks, through the entrance of an arcade, etc., gives a more profound idea of infinity than a wide panorama viewed from the top of a mountain?²

Baudelaire immediately grasps the paradox of unlimited scope within a tightly confined space, subtly intimating that the sonnet's intense compression allows a privileged vision of the world, a deeper awareness of infinity than more expansive forms permit. The point is made again by Théophile Gautier in his 'Notice' to the 1868 edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, in which he acknowledges how 'a mighty concept can move freely in these methodically organised fourteen lines'. Even so, Gautier has misgivings about the liberties that Baudelaire takes with the sonnet form, quoting against him his own critique of poets who allow themselves 'free-thinking sonnets,

that is to say unorthodox and happily transgressing' the rules and regulations of rhyme. Gautier's campaign against irregular and illegitimate sonnets was in vain, but we owe to him the appealing nomenclature of *sonnets libertins*, a term that happily describes the vast majority of sonnets written since the end of the nineteenth century (Gautier 1868: 43).

Among the celebrated sonnets in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 'Correspondences' pursues that 'profound idea of infinity' ('l'expansion des choses infinies') that Baudelaire claims the form makes possible, transporting us from the pleasures of the senses to the mysteries of the soul (Baudelaire 1954: 8). Baudelaire was unorthodox and transgressive in more obvious ways than Gautier suggests, of course, composing sonnets that flirted provocatively with the exotic, the macabre, and the grotesque. To Baudelaire must go the credit for having brazenly established a new set of standards for the love sonnet, displacing conventional nineteenth-century pieties in favour of a love in which 'teeth and talons are the fashion' and in which the heart has become a place of 'ulcerated passion' (Baudelaire 1954: 45). At the same time, the depths of remorse, confession, and penitential suffering in Baudelaire's poems endeared him to modern British and American poets, among them T.S. Eliot and Robert Lowell. In his influential *Imitations* (1961), Lowell translated five sonnets by Baudelaire, including 'The Ruined Garden' and 'The Flawed Bell', along with other major achievements in the genre, such as Arthur Rimbaud's 'Eighteen Seventy' sonnet sequence and Paul Valéry's 'Helen'. Lowell's encounter with the nineteenth-century French sonnet would be vitally important in stimulating his own obsessive use of the form and encouraging the exploration of intensely personal subject matter within a strictly circumscribed space.

Roy Campbell, one of the most influential modern translators of Baudelaire, was born in South Africa in 1901, where he founded the literary journal *Voorslag*, intended as a ‘whiplash’ on the South African colonial sensibility. Although his edition of the *Poems of Baudelaire: Les Fleurs du Mal* was not published until the early 1950s, Campbell was profoundly influenced by the French poet, as he reveals in his Translator’s Note: ‘I have been reading Baudelaire since I was fifteen, carried him in my haversack through two wars, and loved him longer and more deeply than any other poet’ (Baudelaire 1954: n. pag). There are few better examples of the sonnet’s modern internationalism than ‘The Zebras’ (1930), in which Campbell’s desire to capture the beauty of the South African landscape combines with the passionate sensuousness of Baudelaire’s love poems:

From the dark woods that breathe of fallen showers,
 Harnessed with level rays in golden reins,
 The zebras draw the dawn across the plains
 Wading knee-deep among the scarlet flowers.
 The sunlight, zithering their flanks with fire,
 Flashes between the shadows as they pass
 Barred with electric tremors through the grass
 Like wind along the gold strings of a lyre.
 Into the flushed air snorting rosy plumes
 That smoulder round their feet in drifting fumes,
 With dove-like voices call the distant fillies,
 While round the herds the stallion wheels his flight,
 Engine of beauty volted with delight,
 To roll his mare among the trampled lilies.
 (Campbell 1955: 40).

Campbell uses the sonnet form with a contrastive power and delicacy reminiscent of the French poet’s handling of the form: the ‘flanks with fire’ and ‘electric tremors’ are derived from Baudelaire’s sonnets on cats, and the vivid flower imagery is also characteristic of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. In other respects, though, Campbell is highly innovative in maximising the compression of the form, employing a highly musical rhyme scheme (*abbacddceefggf*), and exploiting every line phonetically and

semantically. The unusual ‘zithering’ maintains the buzzing sound of ‘zebras’, while simultaneously suggesting (in the imagined plucking of strings) both the play of sunlight (previously figured in the equestrian image of ‘golden reins’) and the thrill of music (in ‘the gold strings of a lyre’). The interplay of sunlight and shadows is likened to the ‘barred’ pattern of the zebra, while ‘rosy plumes’ vividly catches the colour and texture of the breath snorted from the animal’s nostrils against the rising sun.

The rhyme scheme employed for ‘The Zebras’ is put to use in another well-known sonnet, ‘The Serf’, popularised through its inclusion in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, edited by W.B. Yeats, in 1936. Like Yeats, Campbell was attracted to the autocratic, right-wing politics of the 1930s (he supported Franco in the Spanish Civil War), but at a national level he is apt to idealise the African labourer, much as Yeats romanticises the Irish peasantry. Even so, ‘The Serf’ is surprisingly radical in its political vision, and formally effective in the way that it begins its turn after a strong mid-line caesura and then unwinds a single sinuous sentence that finds its satisfaction in the cumulative destruction of the closing line:

But as the turf divides
I see in the slow progress of his strides
Over the toppled clods and falling flowers,
The timeless, surly patience of the serf
That moves the nearest to the naked earth
And ploughs down palaces, and thrones, and towers.
(Campbell 1955: 30).

Campbell’s achievement here is to reconnect the sonnet with its popular, democratic heritage, echoing Shakespeare and Shelley as he does so. At the same time, it might be argued that the very form of the sonnet, with its eloquent standard English, too easily contains and aestheticises the already antiquated figure of ‘the serf’ whose

heart is ‘insult torn’. A later generation of poets writing back from the margins of Empire would seek a different formal articulation of that far cry from Africa.

The opening of one of Allen Curnow’s best-known poems initially appears to be such a cry – ‘Weeping for bones in Africa I turn / Our youth over like a dead bird in my hand’ – but this elegiac sonnet issues from New Zealand. ‘In Memoriam 2 / Lieutenant T. C. F. Ronalds’ was written for Curnow’s cousin, who was killed in April 1943 as the Eighth Allied Army moved into Enfidaville, near Tunis. As the speaker turns over his shared youth in an act of meditation, the sonnet itself turns prematurely, questioning its own motives, but nevertheless giving emphasis to its cry: ‘And why should my report / Cry one more hero...?’ Curnow avoids any unseemly glorification of the soldier’s death and any suggestion that some corner of a foreign field is thereby enriched, but he does allow the sonnet to search for common ground between New Zealand and North Africa, even if this amounts to no more than the telling of tall tales: ‘But O if your blood’s tongued it must recite / South Island feats, those tall snow-country tales / Among incredulous Tunisian hills’ (Curnow 1997: 225). As well as facilitating the imaginative transportation from the southern to the northern hemisphere, the sonnet meets the generic expectations of elegy in registering both the need for impassioned speech and its ultimate collapse in bewildered disbelief.

While Curnow was publishing his poems in Christchurch, the young Derek Walcott was coming to consciousness as a writer in Castries, St Lucia, seeking ways of representing his own Caribbean landscapes and experiences in the English literary models inherited from a colonial education. When fire ravaged Castries in 1948, the eighteen year-old writer turned to the sonnet as a form that might capture the intensity of the occasion and memorialise its devastating effects on the physical structures of

the city, as well as on the religious faith of its inhabitants. 'A City's Death by Fire' was instrumental in launching Walcott's poetic career (it appeared in his *25 Poems*, published in Trinidad the same year), and it signaled a serious determination to give St Lucia prominence in art and literature. The poem clearly shows the influence of 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London' by Dylan Thomas (1946), especially in its religious symbolism, its emphatic wordplay, and its air of proclamation. At the same time, it demonstrates a bold and original handling of the sonnet form:

After that hot gossamer had levelled all but the church'd sky,
I wrote the tale by tallow of a city's death by fire;
Under a candle's eye, that smoked in tears, I
Wanted to tell, in more than wax, of faiths that were snapped like wire.

The expansive lines and the alert first person pronoun capture the urgency of a tale that must be told. The rhyme scheme begins conventionally enough (*abab*) but modulates into the unexpected (*cbbc*), and then (coinciding with a questioning sestet) into increasing uncertainty. As the poem seeks to rebuild belief after 'the baptism by fire', it strategically positions 'faiths' between 'fails' and 'breath', giving it the possibility of rhyming with either. The most prominent rhymes in the poem, however, are those that emanate from 'fire' (Walcott 1986: 6).

In his 'Tales of the Islands', a sonnet sequence first published in the Caribbean literary journal *Bim* in 1958, Walcott experimented with a range of different voices and viewpoints that would capture the cultural *mélange* of St Lucia and the surrounding islands. He wrote to Frank Collymore, the editor of the journal, that he had been trying to give the sonnets 'a certain factual, biographical plainness'. His aim was 'to dislocate the traditional idea of the sonnet as a fourteen line piece of music' and establish a prose-like 'dispassionate observation' (Chamberlin 1993: 117-18). As the title of the sequence implies, there is a loose narrative and anecdotal framework,

with each of the ten sonnets presented as a ‘chapter’, sometimes carrying a brief epigraph. The sonnets are powerfully evocative vignettes of St Lucian people, places, and cultural traditions. *Chapter I / La rivière dorée* is set in Choiseul and contrasts the sensuous appeal of the river ‘rushing cool / Through gorges of green cedars’ with the spiritual transcendence of the ‘stone cathedral’. *Chapter III / La belle quit fut* introduces us to the eccentric Miss Rossignol who ‘lived in the lazaretto / For Roman Catholic crones’, one of a number of local characters who inhabit the tales and fuel their mix of gossip and superstition (1986: 22-3).

The most striking innovation in Walcott’s sonnets, though, is the introduction of different tones and dialects representative of the islands, including what is often described as ‘the broken French’ of St Lucian Creole or patois, the West Indian English used throughout the islands, and the standard English associated with a colonial education, as well as with the language of English literature. Walcott’s revisions of the sonnets show him deftly bringing these different linguistic registers of class and culture into ironic alignment with each other. *Chapter VI* opens and closes with contrasting rituals – the music of steel bands and voodoo – both commonly associated with the Caribbean. The sonnet originally began

Garçon, that was a fête. . . I mean they had
Free whisky and they had some fellows beating
Steel from one of the bands in Trinidad. . .
(Chamberlin 1992: 118)

When ‘Tales of the Islands’ was published in Walcott’s first major book of poems, *In a Green Night* (1962), the sixth sonnet was subtly revised to highlight the rhythms of local speech even more emphatically:

Poopa, da’ was a fête! I mean it had
Free rum free whisky and some fellars beating
Pan from one of them band in Trinidad. . .
(1986: 24-5)

The Jamaican poet and critic John Figueroa claimed that this sonnet, in particular, marked ‘the real beginnings of the use of dialect in West Indian poetry’, and Ted Chamberlin in his landmark study of poetry and the West Indies claimed that ‘Walcott’s achievement here was to establish West Indian languages within an English literary tradition’ (King 2000: 183; Chamberlin 1993: 119). It was as if Walcott had first to demonstrate his originality in the handling of a prestige European poetic form, before giving full vent to an independent poetic voice. Tellingly, the closing sonnet of the sequence, *Chapter X / ‘Adieu foulard’*, is less a tale and more a prayerful meditation, full of watching and self-conscious reflections on the art of writing, as the speaker travels by air to Barbados. It is also a love sonnet for St Lucia, and Walcott would once again give it prominence in his work by incorporating it into the closing lines of Part Three of his ambitious verse autobiography, *Another Life* (1973): ‘I watched the island narrowing, the fine / writing of foam around the precipices, then / the roads as small and casual as twine’ (1986: 257). Often, in this way, sonnets provide the impulse for new works of a different scope and magnitude. They travel into new imaginative formations.

There is perhaps no better example of the sonnet’s travels, in both international and inter-generic terms, than Vikram Seth’s verse novel in sonnets, *The Golden Gate* (1986). Here, an Indian novelist and poet fastens enthusiastically upon the sonnet form devised by Alexander Pushkin for *Eugene Onegin* (1833), using the Russian-English translation provided by a British diplomat, Sir Charles Johnston, in 1977. The cultural geography of the experiment is all the more striking when we recall that Pushkin’s hero and heroine, Onegin and Tatyana, are seen to be more at ease in the French than in the Russian language. Seth arranges his San Francisco comedy of manners in thirteen books, comprising a total of 590 sonnets in iambic

tetrameter, rhyming AbAbCCddEffEgg (where the capital letters stand for feminine rhymes), and he extends the form to the preliminary Acknowledgements, Dedication, and Contents, as well as to his closing note About the Author. The combination of a brisk metre and an intricate rhyme scheme calls for great agility, especially when extended over the thirteen books of Seth's experimental novel. 'Pushkin in Silicon Valley', as Marjorie Perloff dubbed it, follows the fortunes of a young computer scientist, John Brown, and his Bay area friends in what is primarily a light-hearted, comic mode. At times, however, the mood darkens and individual sonnets seem uncertainly positioned between comic satire and elegy. In 13.11, for instance, John arrives at the hospital where his partner, Jan, is in a coma, and he strives 'To induce the starched and startled nurses / With incoherent tears and curses' to let him in. He is told that he will have to ask permission from their supervisor: "'She'll be down soon," they sighed and fled. / She came. But Jan by then was dead' (Seth 1986: 286). The difficulty here is that repeated rhyming couplets impel the sonnet towards comedy, while the brisk tetrameter verse doesn't allow much room for tonal variation. Where these sonnets do succeed is in capturing, in brief impressionist glimpses, both the cityscape of San Francisco ('the city's glittering grid. The Transamerica Pyramid') and the magnificence of the Pacific coastline, 'With wharves and cypresses and pines' (1986: 281, 257).

A major part of the challenge facing any translator of a sonnet sequence or a sonnet novel, even when producing a 'version' rather than a strict translation, is to maintain what Johnston termed the *brio* of the work; that is, to sustain the linguistic energy or liveliness of the original and make it work in different cultural and geographical settings (Pushkin 1979: 29). In *The Golden Gate*, this endeavour is greatly aided by Seth's adoption a vigorously colloquial idiom, including slang, which

is a feature of the original. The energy is also propelled, of course, by the element of plot inherited from Pushkin's narrative. Translating a complex philosophical work such as Rilke's enigmatic *Sonette an Orpheus* (1923) raises linguistic and structural questions of a different order and magnitude. Undaunted by this challenge, the Scottish poet Don Paterson set about producing a version of a work that is generally regarded not just as one of the masterpieces of German literature, but as one of the most compelling sonnet sequences in the twentieth century. One of the consequences of Paterson's intensely powerful *Orpheus* (2006) was to strengthen his conviction, resolutely expressed elsewhere in his work, that sonnets *and sonnet sequences* are peculiarly well suited to the exploration of existential dilemmas.

Paterson's fourteen-part Afterword to *Orpheus* provides an illuminating introduction to Rilke's lyric masterpiece, and also reinforces his own belief that the sonnet is a highly versatile instrument that travels extremely well. What generates the German poet's sonnets, according to Paterson (and what might be said to drive his own poetic practice), is 'sheer wondering enquiry' (Paterson 2006: 67). The figure of Orpheus, he claims, is emblematic of our own 'conscious foreknowledge' of death, our own state of ghosthood, having 'descended to the land of the shades' and returned to 'the living present' (2006: 68). In *Orpheus*, Rilke discovers 'the ideal possessor of the "double realm"' and a model of how to live with the paradox of human consciousness (2006: 69). Paterson's version of the sonnets to Orpheus takes on the mystery and the urgent summons of the original work, while deftly shaping it to reflect his own concern with the 'moral education and comfort' that poetry might provide.³ An empathetic language of instruction is given lyric expression in Paterson's grave and lucid sonnets, culminating in the equanimity of 'Being': 'Our

senses cannot fathom this night, so / be the meaning of their strange encounter; / at their crossing, be the radiant centre' (2006: 59).

Sheer wondering enquiry motivates the remarkable achievement of Paterson's *40 Sonnets* (2015), in which the flux of consciousness is matched by a bold adventurousness with form. *Orpheus* closes with 'Being' and *40 Sonnets* opens with 'Here', conjuring up what Larkin memorably termed 'the million-petalled flower / Of being here' (Larkin 2012: 81). What it is to be, and to be here, prompts multiple unanswerable questions, reinvigorating the sonnet as a space for meditation, as with 'The Air': 'When will the air stop breathing? Will it all / come to nothing, if nothing came to this?' (Paterson 2015: 3). Several of the poems are existential musings ('Souls') or ontological riddles ('Seven Questions about the Journey'), but these are grounded and relieved by mordant satirical reflections on social institutions ('To Dundee City Council') and on poetry itself ('Requests'). Sometimes the sonnets give shape to the push and pull of existence in an apt metaphor such as the stalled lift in 'A Powercut' or the stalled wooden roundabout in 'The Roundabout', once again reminding us of Paterson's fondness for the metaphysical conceit. What all of the poems share, however, is a willingness to challenge and exceed what might be thought of as conventional subject matter for the sonnet. 'Mercies' is an elegiac love sonnet for a dog 'put down' that uses its premature turning in line seven to intensify its meditation on love and loss:

So I turned her face to mine,
And seeing only love there – which, for all
The wolf in her, she knew as well as we did –
She lay back down and let the needle enter.
(2015: 43).

There is a strategic turning, too, in 'The Roundabout', which turns back to Rilke and the verities of being in its recognition of the need to keep going: 'there was nothing in

the world to prove our turning / but our light heads, and the wind's lung' (2015: 44).

Although Paterson distances himself from 'spiritual writing' that communicates 'belief', his own wondering sonnets have an orison-like quality (emphatically so in 'Funeral Prayer'), and what they frequently utter is the miraculousness of utterance itself.

Paterson's sheer wondering enquiry is a quality that he shares with a poet he considers in his *101 Sonnets from Shakespeare to Heaney* to be 'one of the contemporary masters of the sonnet' (Paterson 1999: 115). Paul Muldoon has justly earned that reputation, not least for having made the sonnet a place where strange and dark encounters, including encounters with the self, habitually take place. Among *101 Sonnets* is 'The Princess and the Pea', Muldoon's gruesome sonnet adapted from the Danish fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen. As Paterson wryly notes, the sonnet intensifies the dark subtextual side of fairy tales, with 'things taking, literally, a very nasty turn' (1999: 116). The sestet shows 'the older sister' of the princess 'stretched on the open grave / Of all the men she has known'. 'Far down something niggles. The stir / Of someone still alive. / Then a cry far down. It is your own' (Muldoon 2011: 91). The haunting distance achieved in the simple repetition of 'far down' is swiftly brought home, visually and phonetically, in the sudden curtailment of 'your own'. The attraction of the sonnet for Muldoon has much to do with the swiftness with which it enables a sudden transformation of vision or a turning from one mode of comprehension to another. His mysterious early sonnet, 'Why Brownlee Left', purports to offer an explanation for the disappearance of the eponymous farm worker, but its main function is to create suspense, leaving us with two unsettled and unsettling black horses, 'Shifting their weight from foot to / Foot, and gazing into the future' (2001: 84). For all its Irish rural trappings, 'Why Brownlee Left' is a sonnet

that announces a willingness to travel, perhaps even a need to go elsewhere.

Throughout his own travels, Muldoon has carried the sonnet with him, much as the word *quoof*, ‘our family word / for the hot water bottle’, is carried unsettlingly from the father’s ‘childhood settle’ in County Armagh to ‘A hotel room in New York City’ (2001: 112).

The idea of finding expansiveness within the formal compression of the sonnet has continued to motivate Muldoon, especially since the publication of the aptly titled and well-travelled *Horse Latitudes* (2006). The title poem of the volume is a sonnet sequence written in the context of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. It maps a variety of places, all beginning with B, where major battles have taken place:

Bannockburn, Bosworth Field, Blenheim, Bull Run, Burma. The missing place, which also happens to be the fourteenth in what would otherwise be a sonnet of sonnets, is Baghdad. All of the battles included in the sequence have involved the use of horses or mules. ‘Intercut with those battle scenes’, as Muldoon’s ‘Note on the Text’ informs us, ‘are accounts of a “battle” with cancer by a former lover, here named Carlotta [like Muldoon’s former partner, Mary Farl Powers, an artist], and a commentary on the agenda of what may only be described as the Bush “regime”’.⁴ The opening sonnet in the sequence is ‘Beijing’:

I could still hear the musicians
 cajoling those thousands of clay
 horses and horsemen through the squeeze
 when I woke beside Carlotta.
 Life-size, also. Also terra-cotta.
 The sky was still a terra-cotta frieze
 over which her grandfather still held sway
 with the set square, fretsaw, stencil,
 plumb line, and carpenter’s pencil
 his grandfather brought from Roma.
 Proud-fleshed Carlotta. Hypersarcoma.
 For now our highest ambition
 was simply to bear the light of the day
 we had once been planning to seize.

(Muldoon 2006: 3).

Beijing is conjured up in the powerful image of the terracotta army of warriors and horsemen excavated in China in 1974, with that image also impressing upon us the ambitious making of an art that might survive the centuries. At the same time, the clay is an unignorable reminder of human mortality, just as the ‘Life-size’ figures ironically comment on Carlotta’s imminent death. The grandfather is a planner and a craftsman who represents survival and inheritance, though his ‘fret-saw’ is an ominous image of pain and separation. The cruel rhyming of ‘Roma’ and ‘Hypersarcoma’ is indicative of losses and collisions that the sonnet is at pains to expose rather than conceal. Embedded in the desultory closing tercet are passing allusions to Andrew Marvell, invoking both ‘An Horatian Ode Upon the Return of Cromwell from Ireland’ (‘As if his highest plot / To plant the bergamot’) and ‘To His Coy Mistress’ (with its strong *carpe diem* theme). The subtle shift of tense at the end of the sonnet cancels out the possibility of seizing the day, with the abject mood of the lines resulting in part from their delayed and distant rhymes. With a curiously elaborate rhyme scheme (*abcddcbeeffabc*), the sonnet contrives to return us to where we started, in clay. *Horse Latitudes* revitalizes the sonnet and the sonnet sequence. It brings together the principal functions that have preoccupied the sonnet since its inception, impressing upon us love poem, elegy, and polemic all at once.

Horse Latitudes is dedicated to the memory of the poet’s sister, Maureen Muldoon (1953-2005), who is also remembered in his elegiac ‘Hedge School’ sonnet at the end of the collection. From its setting in St Andrews in Scotland, the sonnet travels back to Muldoon’s former home in Ireland and then further across the Atlantic to his new home in America. The geography of the poem finds a common climate in multiple ‘rainy mornings’ that drift into personal mournings. Muldoon ruefully

reflects on learning and liberty, and on the need for vigilance, linking his great-great-grandmother's role as lookout for an outlawed Catholic hedge school with his daughter's 'all-American Latin class' that 'may yet be forced to conjugate / *Guantánamo, amas, amat*'. Taking liberties with the sonnet form, while putting its learning on show in etymology and allusion, the poem notes how enlightenment is no guarantee of either happiness or freedom. Muldoon clearly knows his Shakespeare well enough to cite Luciana's claim in *A Comedy of Errors* that 'headstrong liberty is lash'd / with woe' (2.1. 287), but he finds himself stranded like a hedge school pupil, 'sheltered in a doorway' in St Andrews, where 'another Maelduin' was once bishop. Playing with etymology is both a diversion from grief and a genuine quest for knowledge, a point well illustrated in the abnormally long penultimate line containing 'the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*'. The rhyme that frames the sestet of the sonnet, 'Sis' and '*metastasis*', powerfully embodies the distance between intimate, family attachment and the awful, impersonal realisation of impending death (2006: 94). It effectively seals the sonnet's preoccupation with tracing roots and translating grief.

Versions, imitations, and translations ensure that the sonnet continues to travel widely, but so, too, does the sonnet's capacity for measuring and articulating the distances inherent in grief and loss. In another elegiac sonnet, another contemporary Irish poet looks back to Petrarch, to the closing sonnet of the *Rime Sparse*. This is 'Exequy' (*from the Italian of Petrarch*) by Derek Mahon:

The eyes of which I spoke so warmly once,
the face and figure, shoulders, hands and knees
that once deranged my rational faculties
and made me different from the usual bunch;
the quick inviting smile and generous breast,
the streaming hair with its angelic glow
that seemed to make a paradise below,
are now a whisper of insentient dust.

Yet I live on, in grief and self-disdain,
 bereft of the light I loved so earnestly,
 as if on a lost ship in a storm at sea.
 Now there will be no more love poetry:
 the vital flow has dried up in the vein
 and the strings whimper in a minor key.
 (Mahon 2013: 70).

Petrarch's sonnet has been translated and imitated many times, but rarely with such haunting gravity. Strictly speaking, what Mahon has written here is an adaptation, and it appears in an aptly titled collection of such poems, *Echo's Grove* (2013). In his foreword to the book, he candidly confides that he has 'taken many liberties, in the hope that the results will read *almost* like original poems in English, while allowing their sources to remain audible' (2013: 15). Petrarch's original is often regarded as a sonnet of recantation. It mourns the loss of wasted time and addresses its regrets to God, the King of Heaven ('Re del Cielo'). There is none of this in Mahon's subdued reflections, which register a grievous loss – a loss of light equated here with the inspiration so vital to poetry. Petrarch's rhymes (*abba abba cdc dcd*) are subtly amended to *abbacddc efffef*, but the sonnet retains a strong turn and a clear sense of division between its closing tercets. It also holds on to the familiar Petrarchan navigation conceit, though significantly the speaker in the original longs to die in peace and in port ('mora in pace et in porto'), while Mahon's speaker lives on, as if still lost at sea. With a final twist that signals his sonnet's ultimate concern with the lifeblood of poetry itself, Mahon hears an echo in 'et se la stanza / fu vana' ('if my stay has been in vain') and writes it down as 'vein' (Petrarch 2002: 150). The whimpering strings in the final line are entirely his own. Mahon's 'Exequy' is a startling invention of farewell. In the moment of carrying out its funeral rites, it shimmers with the possibility of renewal. Even as it turns from love poetry to elegy in

a plaintive minor key, it speaks eloquently of the persistence and durability of the sonnet over centuries. In its subtle adaptation of Petrarch, it acknowledges and invigorates the sonnet as a form pre-eminently associated with love and loss, and it reminds us that poems will be born of other poems. Every sonnet has an echo and what it says is 'I live on'.

Notes

¹ For informative critical studies of the sonnet see Fuller (1972), Spiller (1992), and Burts and Mikics (2010). Burts and Mikics include sonnets from Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, as well as from Britain, Ireland, and America.

² The extracts from Baudelaire's letters are from *Correspondances 1: 1832-1860* (see Baudelaire (1973) below), pp. 674-77. I am grateful to David Darbyshire for his help in translating these letters.

³ 'Leading Light', An Interview with Don Paterson by Nicholas Wroe, *Guardian*, 25 November 2006, p. 11.

⁴ Muldoon's 'Note on the Text' of 'Horse Latitudes' accompanies the first printing of the sonnets in his *Medley for Morin Khur* (London: Enitharmon, 2005), n. pag. The sonnets were later reprinted in *Horse Latitudes* (London: Faber, 2006).

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